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Diana T Fritz 03/20/2007 05:33:10 PM From DB/Inbox: Search Results

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TELEGRAM

September 02, 2003

To: No Action Addressee
Action: Unknown
From: AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI (ABU DHABI 3994 - UNKNOWN)
TAGS: PREL, ECON, PGOV, KMDR
Captions: None
Subject: BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD FACE: AL ARABIYA CHANGES ITS VIEWS TO THE ARAB WORLD
Ref: None

S E C R E T ABU DHABI 03994

SIPDIS
CXABU:
ACTION: PAO
INFO: ECON AMB DCM POL
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ACTION: PAO

DISSEMINATION: PAO
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: CDA:RALBRIGHT
DRAFTED: PAO:TPONCE
CLEARED: PAO:HOLSIN-WINDECKER, POL:JMAYBURY, CGD:JDAVIS

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FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1505
RUENAAA/SECNAV WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEHZM/GCC COLLECTIVE
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0706
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0750
RHRMDAB/COMUSNAVCENT
RUCJACC/USCINCCENT MACDILL AFB FL//CCPA//
RUCQSOC/USCINCSOC MACDILL AFB FL//PA//
INFO RHMFIA/HQ COALITION PROVISIONAL AUTH BAGHDAD

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ABU DHABI 003994

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/FO; NEA/RA; NEA/ARP (DJONES, TWILLIAMS, LMALENAS); NEA/PPD (DMACINNES, JKINCANNON, JDAVIES); NEA/P (GSULLIVAN, ACASPER, JSMITH); PA
CPA FOR NKHOURY
WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE; NSC
SECDEF FOR OASD/PA
USCINCCENT FOR POLAD
LONDON FOR MOC MHAMBLEY

TAGS: PREL KMDR ECON PGOV ZP
SUBJECT: BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD FACE: AL ARABIYA CHANGES ITS VIEWS TO THE ARAB WORLD

CLASSIFIED BY CDA RICHARD ALBRIGHT FOR E.O. 12958 REASONS 1.5 (B)
AND (D)

¶11. (C) Summary: During an August 9th broadcast, Arabic Satellite News Channel al Arabiya aired videos of militant organizations urging Iraqis and Arabs to target "Occupation" forces. Again on August 28th, the station broadcast footage of similarly hooded men threatening to kill Iraqi Governing Council members. These controversial videos and other sensational coverage are a departure from al Arabiya's formative goal of moderate news reporting. As al Arabiya strives to best al Jazira, an important Abu Dhabi TV source pointed out that these broadcasts, and public confrontations with the USG, are likely to increase al Arabiya's Arab viewership, at least in the short term. End Summary.

Al Arabiya, Saudi Arabia, and Dubai's Media City

¶12. (C) Al Arabiya Arabic Satellite News Channel is owned principally by wealthy Saudi businessman Waleed bin Ibrahim al Ibrahim, a principal shareowner of Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), al Arabiya's parent company, and whose sister Jawhara bint Ibrahim al Ibrahim is a wife of King Fahd. Al Arabiya's remaining major investors include Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al Hariri, and reportedly, a number of Omani and UAE businessmen. This list also included several prominent Kuwaiti investors, who withdrew during the war with Iraq due to al Arabiya's pro-Saddam message. According to al Arabiya sources, however, Kuwaiti businessman and royal family member Ahmed al Fahed Al Sabah quietly reinvested after the war.

¶13. (C) Early in 2002, these investors decided to establish a satellite news channel to counter al Jazira's anti-Gulf tones. To attract Arab viewers, the investors tapped Salah Najm, ex-al Jazira news and current affairs director, to mold the station with MBC's current news staff. To serve as spokesperson, Salah enlisted Saleh Qallah, a former Jordanian Information Minister who had allowed MBC FM radio broadcasts in Jordan while other Arab leaders balked. Following the station's launch in February 2003, al Arabiya stuck to its mold initially, producing balanced and well-formatted news broadcasts. As a result, the Saudi government requested that al Arabiya launch a Government-owned news channel in Riyadh and train its Saudi journalists.

¶14. (C) Along with CNN, Reuters, CNBC, AP, and a Radio Sawa office, MBC and al Arabiya are based in Dubai's Media City (DMC), part of the Dubai Technology, Electronic Commerce and Media Zone (TECOM). TECOM is one of the high-profile initiatives of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashed al Maktoum, Dubai Crown Prince (and de facto ruler) and UAE Minister of Defense, and is supervised by MBR's Executive Office. DMC day-to-day operations are managed by a board of directors led by CEO Abdalhamid al Juma', a member of the wealthy Dubai al Juma' family. DMC currently hosts over 350 organizations, which, for the most part, enjoy unfettered operation. During the past year, these organizations reported that they experienced little or no restrictions on the content of print and broadcast material produced for use outside the country. Indeed, to promote TECOM's independence, MBR's Executive Office allows all tenants a free hand, provided that materials do not touch on three taboo subjects: religion, pornography, or domestic "political sensitivities," meaning UAE families.

Al Arabiya's Moderate Voice Turns Sour

¶15. (C) The war in Iraq and violence in Israel brought a change in al Arabiya's reporting, apparently in reaction to strong public sentiment against both. During the war, al Arabiya aired sensational material, such as footage of dead Iraqi civilians and captured American POWs, out of a perceived need to compete with al Jazira. On the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, al Arabiya

repeatedly aired Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon saying, "I am a man of peace," with images of dead Palestinian children and IDF bulldozers destroying Palestinian homes. Since the war's end, al Arabiya has persisted in portraying the U.S. presence in Iraq as a hostile occupation rather than a liberation. Some the more sensational stories carried on the pan-Arab outlets, including al Arabiya, have provoked comment such as the August 13th "al Sharq al Awsat" column by Iraqi Adnan Husayn claiming Arab networks are engaging in "blackmail" and "deceit" in Iraq.

¶6. (S) According to ORCA sources, al Arabiya has sought to film attacks on coalition soldiers. Nart Bouran, Head of Abu Dhabi TV's News Center and close advisor to UAE Minister of Information and Culture Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, confirmed this with APAO, noting that al Arabiya used an Iraqi stringer around al Ramadi in an attempt to obtain footage of attacks on coalition forces. This was also corroborated by Iraqi Abu Dhabi TV cameraman Haydar Jafar, who, after returning from Iraq, informed APAO of al Arabiya's same effort.

¶7. (U) On August 9 and 28, Al Arabiya broadcast videos of hooded men claiming to be from the "Islamic Jihad Movement," "White Flags," "Organization of Muslim Youth," and "The Army of Mohammed." In the August 9th video, the men criticized Iraqi Shi'ite clerics for not declaring jihad against the "Occupation," and called upon Iraqis and Arabs to fight the "Occupation." Most recently on August 28th, the men declared their intent to kill Iraqi Governing Council members and their supporters, whom they labeled "spies" and "traitors."

Responses to the Videos and US Criticism

¶8. (U) Following the Najaf bombing, Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) members Ibrahim Jaafari and Dr. Muhsin Abd al Hamid appeared on Al Arabiya and discussed the station's broadcast of the videos. Dr. Abd al Hamid noted that "the legal experts in the council say that the transmission of such ideas, like inciting people to kill members of the Governing Council, is a violation of the law." In his interview, IGC President Jaafari said that, "should some channels, God forbid, engage in incitement that tarnishes Iraq's reputation and suppresses facts ... I assume a channel should be given a warning that it is perceived to be crossing internationally accepted red lines" and "if need be, it (the channel) can be sued through judicial, civilized means."

¶9. (U) On August 30th, all UAE Arabic and English dailies carried an Agence France Presse (AFP) interview with News Director Salah Najm, who responded to criticism of al Arabiya's broadcasts. In the interview, Najm said that "we believe in the freedom of the media and the right of people to know." On their decision to broadcast the videos, Najm remarked that al Arabiya "will not change their policy" and "we don't take into consideration political and security values."

Confrontation With USG May Increase Arabiya Viewership

¶10. (U) On August 29th, Dubai-based English-language daily "Gulf News" ran an editorial entitled "Airing Opinion is Part of Free Speech." The editorial stated that "the United States is wrong to criticize al Arabiya TV channel's broadcast of statements by (the) men." The editorial concluded that "the US and the vast majority of Arabs will disagree with the speakers. The right course of action is for them to speak out and say that the violence that the speakers espouse is totally unacceptable. The attacks on the coalition forces, the UN, and the Jordanian embassy are wrong. They are a destructive use of terror which does not serve Iraq at all, and they only help destabilize the reconstruction of the country. But the right of the TV station to interview these people, and for speakers to broadcast their view should not be in question. For the US, to call it 'irresponsible in the extreme' denies the US' own commitment to free speech. The future of Iraq needs a peaceful transition to an independent government. Part of achieving this is to maintain an open debate."

¶11. (C) Abu Dhabi TV Chief News Editor Fahed Husseini told PAO INFOSPEC that the recent statements of Acting Department Spokesperson DAS Phil Reeker on Al Arabiya "will definitely increase Al Arabiya's viewership." Fahed noted that Al Arabiya's controversial (and sometimes false) reporting resonates with the anti-American attitudes of the Arab street. However, Fahed pointed out that Al Arabiya's controversial broadcasts "could backfire in the long term if the USG stops granting it interviews, as European governments and other US allies may do as well."

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